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THE VIEW FROM DARIEN

## Joining Forces to Stem Flooding

By GEORGIA KRAL

DARIEN

FOR weeks at a time last year, Vanessa Wood's property here looked more like a pond than a backyard. Mrs. Wood and her family live along Stony Brook, which flows from as far north as New Canaan and into the Long Island Sound. In the past year it has overflowed its banks four times, damaging Mrs. Wood's house, garage and two motorcycles.

"There was a lake around my house," she said. "It looked like a big swimming pool."

Mrs. Wood — one of dozens of Darien home and business owners severely affected by flooding — started a blog last spring, [DarienFlooding](#), to inform residents and those outside Darien about the problem. Last month, Mrs. Wood, with Laura Giobbi, another resident whose home was damaged, decided to join efforts with a nonprofit group, Save Darien's Wetlands.

The merger helped to re-energize the group after the death of its founder, Lee Fingar, last July. The group's new focus is to rally homeowners who have been affected by floods and to demand that the town come up with solutions to protect homes and businesses, particularly by enforcing stricter building regulations.

While Darien has a history of overflowing watersheds, many factors have contributed to the recent flooding. Peter N. Hillman, chairman of the town Environmental Protection Commission and the Flood Erosion Control Board, pointed to significant residential and commercial development in town. He said that Darien was 98.5 percent developed, a figure he called astounding.

[Climate change](#) and aging infrastructure have also played a role, Mr. Hillman said. Darien is a coastal town and much of inland [Connecticut](#) naturally runs into it, he said. "Water has to go down the drain," Mr. Hillman said. "And some of our rivers start considerably far north and west of town."

Mrs. Wood, Mrs. Giobbi and others say that rampant development, which they blame for the increased flooding, could have been avoided. "The town allowed overdevelopment, and drainage was never properly addressed," Mrs. Giobbi said.

David Keating, the assistant director in Darien's Planning and Zoning Department, said that for years there have been regulations on commercial development, new subdivisions and special permit uses (churches, for example) in residential zones. The regulations say detention systems must be in place to deal with added runoff.

But what has not been covered are additions to existing homes or the tearing down of homes to build bigger homes, which often happens in Darien.

Mr. Keating said that the Planning and Zoning Department was discussing how to regulate residential property development.

The town has discussed ways to control flooding for years. Flood studies were completed as far back as the 1950s, Mr. Hillman said, but the cost of fixing the problem was deemed too high, so smaller projects were completed instead.

“If some of the suggestions or recommendations made 50 years ago had been implemented, yes, we’d have less flooding,” said Evonne M. Klein, the town’s first selectwoman.

To address the current flooding, the Environmental Protection Commission and the Planning and Zoning Commission drafted a five-year plan in April that calls for ensuring that existing culverts and catch basins are properly maintained and fixing areas prone to flooding, starting with Stony Brook, where Mrs. Wood lives.

Mr. Hillman said the project would cost about \$20 million. “Every taxpayer needs to prepare for an increase in property taxes,” he said.

The town has also applied for loans from the [Federal Emergency Management Agency](#) to buy two properties damaged by floods, Ms. Klein said; the federal agency would pay 75 percent of the purchase price, and the town would pay the rest. If the money is awarded, the homes will be demolished and the property will be owned by the town and used for flood control, Ms. Klein said.

In the meantime, Save Darien’s Wetlands, which has about 15 members, continues to raise money and meet.

“This is the gold coast of Fairfield County,” Mr. Hillman said. “This is not the way our system should work.”

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